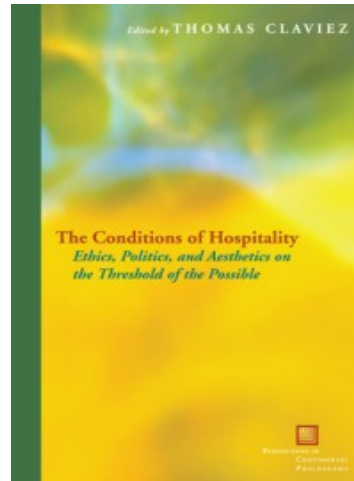


On Hospitality in a Plural Philosophical Perspective

Isabel Pinto



Thomas Claviez (ed.). *The Conditions of Hospitality: Ethics, Politics, and Aesthetics on the Threshold of the Possible*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. Pp. 213

The collection of essays *The Conditions of Hospitality: Ethics, Politics, and Aesthetics on the Threshold of the Possible* results of a conference held in Stavanger, Norway, in September 2008. The main aim of both the conference and the volume was to celebrate and further consider the influential work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida on the concept of hospitality. The theoretical proposals of the two authors are present all over the book, conveying, therefore, a sense of unity and thematic coherence.

In times like these, with too many different procedures for organizing and structuring people, and their goods, being it effective or potential, as I see it, the concept of hospitality lies its foundation everywhere, because if not really comprised to living together, we are stuck at organizing with one another. Social viability depends on being capable of sharing ways of staying, restoring and making, more than just being. Hence, hospitality is a gateway to “eco-social”, an array of strategies to make means and products more reliable and sustainable.

In the introduction, Thomas Claviez presents the general frame to which the individual contributions relate: on one hand, our most globalized world urges the rethinking of hospitality, as a concept, a

practice, a right, whether relying on Derrida's terms of conditional versus unconditional hospitality, or compelling to the transcendence of the Other, as posed by Levinas; on the other hand, the assembled essays look for ways to concretize hospitality, i.e., using Claviez own terms, "to actually "take place"" (3). The articulated effort between theoretical and applied approaches is also reflected on the volume division into three sections: "The Ethics of Hospitality"; "The Politics of Hospitality"; "The Aesthetics of Hospitality".

The first part comprises the contributions of Anne Dufourmantelle (13-23), Thomas Claviez (24-41) and Luce Irigaray (42-54). Dufourmantelle starts by saying it plainly: "Hospitality has become the gateway to hell; [...] hospitality has become the gateway to barbarism" (13-16). Elaborating on unconditional hospitality, she claims that hospitality can be defined as a pure event that allows a new space to be created. She makes it coincide with the space of thinking itself, asserting that thinking implies open up to the other. This idea of thinking as a primordial form of hospitality grounds her perspective on hospitality as the most improbable of happenings: An encounter with the other in its due time and space. For her the only theoretical operative concept of hospitality is, in fact, unconditional hospitality, since, according to her, the philosopher has to keep in mind that only the concept in its incorruptible, absolute radical form, without slippages or nuances, is then fully analyzable. Only from there, can limits and rules be inferred. So, in its layout hospitality is always unavoidably unconditional, for there is no other way of conceiving it. Radical as it is, this approach encourages improved applications of the concept of hospitality. Only through prevailing on the unconditional side, are we able to engage in unconditional thinking of the other, perhaps the rawest form of hospitality.

Thomas Claviez ponders the relevance of the concept of transcendence, in the light of the developments of Levinas and Derrida on hospitality. In his view, transcendence grants no consensus nowadays, as it is most of the time assimilated to universalism, a term avoidable for its imperial connotations. Consequently, the arising question is: "What is the price of either dumping transcendence, or transcending it?" (25). To answer this, Claviez dwells on the effectiveness of the hyperbole that unconditional hospitality entails and reflects on the condition of culture as hospitality: Culture is a gift of the sublime other, something that was not requested or claimed for, leaving those to whom is offered in the position of useless guests, i.e.,

“sublime nature that cannot be controlled or exploited” (34). With some hard reasoning, Claviez is able to claim that hospitality leads to transcending transcendence, and the result mirrors the complexity of the encounter with the other nowadays: Instead of transcendence, we must “acknowledge multiple transcendances” (41).

Luce Irigaray asserts mutual hospitality and the “return to a universal natural identity” (53) as interdependent. She goes back to a time when men and women lived in a feminine culture like brothers and sisters. There hospitality was nurtured, and it came out quite effortlessly. Today, this natural origin has been replaced by a masculine culture, where a living economy governs, and hospitality is, thus, converted into “a sort of charity” (43). But as multiculturalism becomes itself growingly evident, this kind of relation between people, highly structured and dependent on hierarchical circumstances, has shown insufficient to respond to the crucial social challenges. With this in mind, men and women should favor: a) The creation of a space beyond the limits of their own to welcome the other; b) Understanding of the non-equivalence of the terms “familiar” and “universal”, because what is familiar for us is not universally given; c) The approach of the other through discourse as involving silence as a virginal time of acknowledgement. For the place of hospitality is an allocation of freedom, a democratic civilization will only become real when we, men and women, endorse sharing amidst our many differences.

The essays concerning the ethics of hospitality pose serious challenges to cultural studies, inducing new models of conceiving the cultural exchange, i.e., how does hospitality clarify the nature of our cultural practices? How can we incorporate hospitality into our daily cultural routine?

“The Politics of Hospitality” leads us on a revising and critic journey through the relations between nations, state’s policies concerning their borders, and aliens that seem to be continuously pushing their coextension.

Pheng Cheah (57-80) discusses the implications of Derrida’s hospitality for an updated understanding of the several questions posed by contemporary globalization, comparing it with the discourses of hospitality by Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt. For both Marx and Arendt, hospitality belongs to the sphere of the proper. In this sense, hospitality is the integration of all human beings, either through work, action or thought, in the domain of the proper. Henceforth, hospitality

reveals itself as a capacity of humankind, conditioned by the mere proper driving it. Distinctively, Derrida's unconditional hospitality goes beyond humankind, contemplating the nonhuman. According to this, overcoming inhospitality does not imply the refusal of a socioeconomic system like capitalism, but determines a principle of change, beyond the core of human power, since unconditional hospitality irrevocably unsettles the limits and principles regulating conditional hospitality across nations.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen (81-93) directs his attention to today's dynamics between cosmopolitanism, hospitality, identity politics and imperialism. First, he settles the definition and basic features of hospitality: It lies on reciprocity, mutual giving and receiving, entailing a complex world of different worlds, where difference should be viewed as an opportunity instead of a threat. Taking up the dichotomy "The West/ Islam", he asserts the growing polarization and the weakening of reciprocity at the level of the world's political agenda, advocating, nevertheless, that the present time is due a review: The old world structured in terms of nation's hierarchical dependencies is being replaced by a world of networks, where exile, migration, acculturation and hybridization are taking stronger roots each day.

Bonnie Honig's essay (94-110) brings into question the idea of Seyla Benhabib that international institutions recent initiatives gave rise to an increase of cosmopolitan norms. These norms consist, as an example, on new legislative and normative tendencies for the condemnation of genocide. For this, Benhabib focus on Kant's formulation of the right to hospitality, combining it with cosmopolitan universals. Honig opposes to it calling attention to a new political order doomed by racial divisions and stratification, police-state style policing, non-permeable borders, etc. For her, although universality should be taken as a principle, democratic self-determination is an exigency. Consequently, agonistic cosmopolitics can be, in her opinion, a reliable trend towards a renewed openness to concerted actions favoring worlds of diversity, some already existing, others to be build and some others still emergent, all in need of support and sustenance. In this sense, agonistic cosmopolitics is certainly a way to approach conditional hospitality, as first defined by Derrida.

The last essay in the politics section (111-123), by Ulrik Pram Gad, critically surveys the position adopted by Denmark in 2008 regarding Muslim writers in need of a refuge, namely the "Declaration on recognition of the fundamental values of the Danish society" imposed

on them. In his view, this political strategy, evenly centered on “Muslim relations”, does not at all pertain to the domain of unconditional hospitality, and reflects the square limits conditioning the debate around freedom of expression and its legal regulation. Accordingly, there is a need to endorse *strategic studies*, as they map opportunities for articulating more “real life” hospitality, on behalf of the right of the foreigner to be welcomed and safe.

The contributions under the scope of “The Politics of Hospitality” make clear that state’s policies must, at least in some cases, be more inspired by humanitarian and cultural principles than by global economic dynamics. Acknowledging the fact that policies need to be intelligible to be effective, normative trends should not avoid conforming to the different layouts at stake in today’s world. One of the reasons for the sovereignty crisis of the present moment is the lack of intelligible policies in terms of the civil rights they claim to act upon.

The section “The Aesthetics of Hospitality” enters the domain of cultural practices, namely cinema, collective artistic projects, and translation.

Mireille Rosello (127-144) grounds her aesthetical analysis on two different cultural objects: The film *Saint-Jacques La Mecque*, from 2005, directed by Coline Serreau, and *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, a book by Paul Gilroy, published in 2004. She claims that European conviviality as an alternative to European hospitality emerges from both the works considered. Nevertheless, some differences between them must also be pointed out: Gilroy postulates an opposition between the multiculturalism official discourse, erased by a dominant melancholia, and popular culture in urban landscapes, where, he claims, there are existing manifestations of conviviality, i.e., true demonstrations of experienced multiculturalism; Serreau, on the contrary, does not render preexisting conviviality, but tracks conviviality on the risky and frictional domain of human relations in an haphazard context, when daily routine is temporarily suspended.

Nikos Papastergiadis (145-167) introduces a new reading of emerging classifications of the other, the stranger, as zombie. For him, the “zombification” is a strategy to dehumanize the other, and, consequently, to deny any sort of hospitality to him or her. He traces this phenomenon within the postindustrial society, and the global capitalism accompanying it, in which potential incessant mobility

characterizes the spectral figure of the foreigner. Notwithstanding, according to Papastergiadis, the articulated efforts of migrants, activists and artists are relocating the dialogue between hospitality and human rights, through new forms of coupling mobility and identity.

Paola Zaccaria (168-184) attempts to inscribe translation in the fertile domains of hospitality. She deposits great expectations on the space that translation can open, a third common space, still *à venir*, where the borders of both the foreigner's world and the translator's world can be forever changed. The encounter promoted by (open, non-cannibalistic) translation, understood as an ongoing conversation, tends to unconditional hospitality, as formerly conceptualized by Derrida. In her perspective, translation shall be considered vital to disentangling today's not-yet-decolonized world, and overcoming closure, suspicion and discrimination by offering, in replacement, an amicable transnational terrain.

The book also includes "Notes" (185-197), a list of "Works Cited" (199-209), and short biographies of the "Contributors" (211-213).

On the whole, it surpasses as a book grounded on more than good intentions, articulating some clear messages in terms of political positions and law settlements, for it painstakingly claims that more than ever is necessary to make hospitality and human rights coincide, as new forms of mobility inevitably engender new identities. Nonetheless, the volume is in itself characterized by a too dense homogeneity of arguments and disclosures to be taken as a good example of hospitality practice, even if merely conditional.